



**STRATEGY
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**DISCARDED VICTORY – NORTH AFRICA,
1940 - 1941**

BY

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DISCARDED VICTORY – NORTH AFRICA, 1940-41

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ABSTRACT

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The Anglo-Italian campaign of 1940-41 resulted in one of the most lopsided operational victories of the entire Second World War. Strategic misjudgment at the highest levels of British political and military leadership would discard the opportunities won by its fighting forces in North Africa and commit them to a catastrophic intervention in Greece. In 1940, Italy fielded a numerically overwhelming, but technologically deficient, conscript military force on the continent of Africa. Italy's political leaders expected her 500,000 strong North African army to quickly defeat the 50,000 British troops stationed in the theater of operation. The British forces, though inferior in numbers, were well-trained regulars who possessed more superior weaponry than their Italian foes. In the brief, high intensity conflict waged in the North African deserts from December 1940 to February 1941, the British would annihilate an Italian army of 130,000 soldiers. On the verge of complete victory in the North African theater, the British would commit an act of extraordinary strategic misjudgment and divert their efforts to Greece in order to engage the Axis forces on the continent of Europe. The discarded early victory in North Africa would lead Britain to catastrophe in Greece, cost them the initiative in the war, and nearly lead to their defeat in North Africa.

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DISCARDED VICTORY – NORTH AFRICA, 1940-41

MEDITERRANEAN THEATER, 1941 – STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

But if there were no prospect of a successful decision against Germany herself there was a subsidiary theatre where British forces could be employed to harass the enemy and perhaps inflict serious damage. Italy's entry into the war had turned the Middle East into an active theatre of operations. As a center of gravity of British forces it was second only to the United Kingdom itself.

— Michael Howard¹

Following the disastrous defeat of Allied forces in France, the Mediterranean Basin provided Britain its only feasible theater for ground operations against the Axis (see Figure 1). During the first campaign in the Western Desert of North Africa, a British corps comprised of two divisions annihilated a seemingly overpowering Italian army. The small British force was composed of highly trained pre-war regular forces that were mechanized for desert warfare and equipped with relatively modern armored fighting vehicles. Operating on exterior lines of communication that extended some 13,000 miles around the Cape of Good Hope, the British would rely heavily on the military infrastructure within the theater that had been established soon after the outbreak of war.² This logistical structure was instrumental to their success, as the British main lines of communication through the Mediterranean had been severed by Italy.

The Italian forces, numerically, were massive in comparison to the British. With some 500,000 troops in Libya and Ethiopia, the Italian Army appeared to be a juggernaut, which would make short work of the roughly 50,000 British troops in the theater.³ The appearance was deceiving, as the Italian military would rapidly demonstrate its complete ineffectiveness in a modern war. The Italian Army was composed of conscripts who were trained and armed to maintain control of the colonial empire. It was largely foot mobile, equipped with obsolete artillery and armored vehicles, and desperately short of motorized transport. Rather than the conquering horde envisioned by Mussolini, they would soon fill British prisoner of war camps in the hundreds of thousands.

Italy's Navy and Air Force would prove to be as impotent as her Army. The Italian air and sea services were also numerically superior to their opponents, but the quality of British equipment, training, and leadership would decisively and rapidly neutralize both of these Italian assets. The demise of Italy's air and naval forces would largely negate their geographic advantage of interior lines of communication from the Italian mainland to their forces in Libya. The steady destruction of their merchant marine by British air and naval forces based in Malta

would eventually force the Axis to sail on a safer route to Tripoli rather than to the more forward ports of Benghazi and Tobruk. The ability of the British to interdict the sea routes to Libya would play a major role in the dissolution of Axis fortunes in the North African theater of operations.

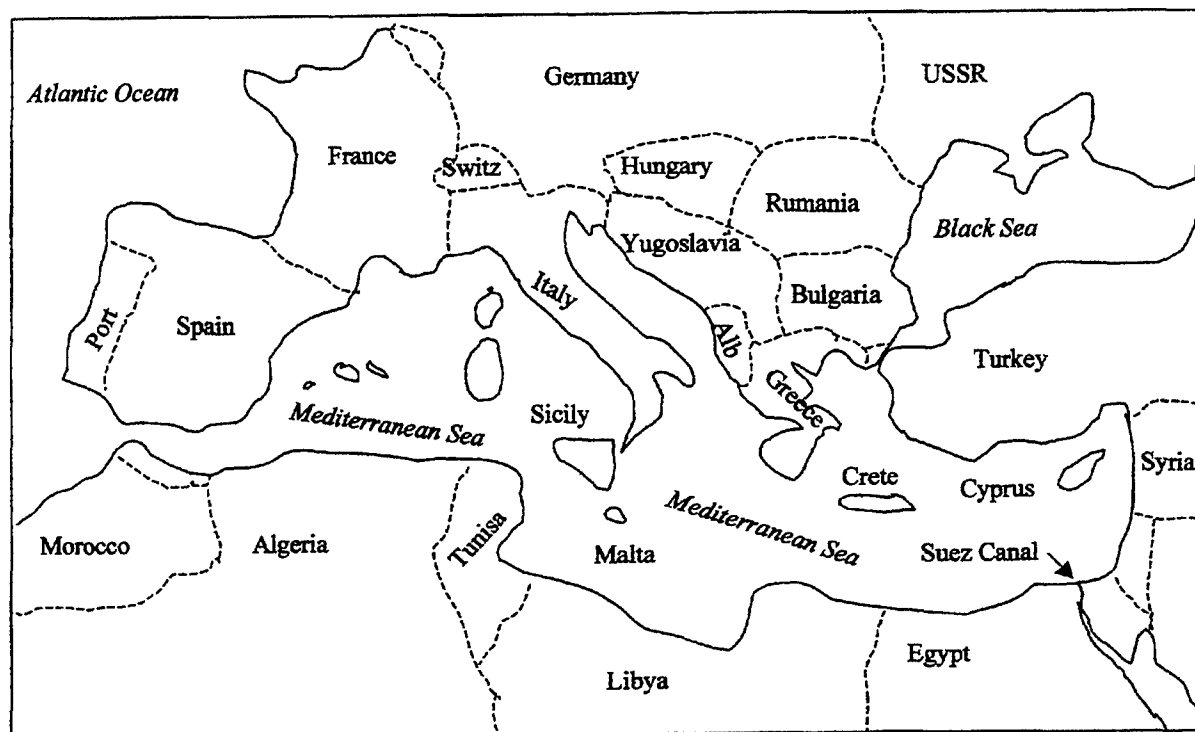


Figure 1: The Mediterranean Basin

The British air, land, and sea forces achieved unity of command through the establishment of a Joint Planning Staff. The Italian services operated independently and coordination of efforts was rarely achieved. The Italians would lose the campaign due to shortfalls in organization and technology, but they would not be ejected from Africa until 1943. The British would win an operational victory but forfeit their gain by an extraordinary strategic misjudgment. Rather than follow up their victorious campaign by conquering all of Libya, Britain halted her triumphant desert army and diverted the greater portion of her military power to Greece.⁴ The British planned an operational halt in North Africa to pursue the more lofty strategic ambition of reentering Europe when the opportunity presented itself in early 1941. This decision ultimately resulted in the destruction of major portions of her combat forces when Germany intervened in Greece on behalf of her faltering Italian ally. The catastrophe in Greece was rapidly followed by an almost equal catastrophe in North Africa when General Erwin Rommel arrived in Libya at the head of the vaunted Africa Corps. Within weeks of Rommel's

arrival, he had smashed the weak British force in Libya and driven it back deep into Egypt. All of Britain's hard-won advantages were erased by mid-1941. Although the Allied powers ultimately prevailed against their Axis foe, the strategic misjudgments by the British leaders in early 1941 squandered operational opportunities in North Africa that would only be regained at horrific material and personnel costs at El Alamein in the closing months of 1942. The British paid dearly for their discarded victory in the North African desert.

The lessons of the first North African campaign retain relevance for modern strategic leaders. Britain organized, equipped, and trained its pre-war military to fight a modern high intensity conflict. The British had concentrated on producing quality rather than quantity to fight their wars. Although Italy maintained numerically larger military forces, their poor training and equipment would make them inferior in virtually every encounter with the British. Technology was just as relevant to a nation's military performance then as it is today. British leaders discounted the fact that they did not possess the means to pursue an aggressive strategy in the Balkans in 1941. They forfeited the initiative in North Africa to pursue other interests in Greece. Driven from Greece, the British managed to stave off disaster in North Africa by the barest of margins by mid-1941. Senior military and political leaders must carefully weigh the ends, ways, and means of their strategy or risk the disasters that befell Britain in 1941 and the first half of 1942.

STRATEGIC SETTING

The British and Italian governments had long-standing colonial interests in the Mediterranean and Africa. As early as the 19th century, the British had established holdings at strategic maritime choke points at Gibraltar, Malta, and Cyprus. In addition, she established colonial possessions in the Middle East and throughout Africa. The key to British Imperial operations lay in control of Egypt and its vital Suez Canal. Through this conduit, she maintained communications to the vital Middle Eastern oil fields and her colony of India.

The Italians were relative newcomers to the colonial scene. Italy had gained colonies in Eritrea and Somaliland in the 1890s prior to suffering an embarrassing defeat at Adowa in 1896 at the hands of an Ethiopian tribal army.⁵ She gained further possessions in Libya and the Dodecanese Islands, following a short war against Turkey in 1912.⁶ The British looked upon Italian adventures benignly until the Italian government fell under the rule of Italian fascists in the 1920s. Under the Dictator Benito Mussolini, Italy began a military buildup that exceeded her purely defensive needs. Italian rhetoric and her increasingly militant actions caused concern

among British leaders. However, instead of confronting the threat directly, the British chose to accommodate Italian ambitions in the interest of maintaining peace.

In 1936, Mussolini sent his armies against the Ethiopian Kingdom ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie. Without assistance from the western democracies, the Ethiopians could not replicate their great victory of Adowa and rapidly succumbed to an Italian foe who ruthlessly used more modern weaponry, to include airpower and poison gas, to decimate the primitive Ethiopian tribal armies.⁷ In addition to conquering Ethiopia, Mussolini sent his legions to Spain to support fascist General Franco's uprising against the Republican government. Italian intervention was crucial to Franco's success and led to the establishment of another fascist dictatorship in Europe. In April 1939, Mussolini extended the Italian Empire by occupying Albania and deposing King Zog from the tribal throne of the tiny Balkan nation.⁸

The reemergence of this new Roman Empire came at a significant economic cost. By 1939 Mussolini's lust for empire had outstripped the capabilities of his country. Italy did not possess the economic and manufacturing capacity to build and maintain a world class military.⁹ Although numerically large, the Italian military forces were hollow as a fighting force. Her huge armies were foot mobile and its few fighting vehicles hopelessly obsolete, the large Air Force was equipped mainly with slow biplane fighters and its bombers were obsolete, fabric-covered aircraft that were too slow and poorly armed to stand up against modern monoplane fighters. Although Italy possessed many fast and powerful warships, the fleet was unpracticed in night fighting or torpedo warfare and so short of fuel that it rarely went to sea as a single unit.¹⁰ The huge cost of maintaining these forces and garrisoning the economically unproductive colonies was gradually driving the national economy into a downward spiral. Italy's economic position was shaky and growing more so as the heavy cost of her foreign policy accumulated.¹¹

As Italy was reaching the end of its military and economic capability, a new fascist powerhouse burst upon the scene. Nazi Germany and its maniacal leader, Adolph Hitler, were driving Europe toward the cataclysm of war. Rapidly rearming their military and possessing enormous industrial capability, the Germans quickly superseded their fascist Italian brothers on the world scene. Mussolini watched ominously as the Germans secured successes in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Unsure whether to join Germany in her advance toward general war, Mussolini sat sullenly on the sidelines until June of 1940. The overwhelming defeat of the west European Allies by Germany during the Battle of France led Mussolini to join the war on the side of Germany. Fearing that he had waited too long to partake in the spoils of victory, Mussolini declared war on 10 June and ordered his forces to advance against the Allies.¹² Expecting no serious fighting, he confidently told Marshal Pietro Badoglio, "I need only a few

thousand dead to ensure that I have the right to sit at the peace table in the capacity of a belligerent."¹³ The Italian military was caught hopelessly flat-footed by Mussolini's decision and were wholly unprepared for any aggressive action. Their only offensive effort was against southern France and, even there, a weakened French Army quickly stopped them cold in their tracks.¹⁴ When France surrendered, Mussolini demanded territorial concessions in Tunisia, Corsica, and Somaliland¹⁵ and surrender of the French fleet and air force.¹⁶ Hitler refused these requests primarily to secure good relations with the puppet Vichy government installed to administer unoccupied France. Denied his easy spoils at France's expense, Mussolini found that he was now at war with Britain. He quickly cast covetous eyes upon British-held Egypt and the Middle East, possessing not only the vital Suez Canal but also the bulk of the world's petroleum supply. Mussolini would soon discover that his desires would remain beyond his grasp and would ultimately propel his new Roman Empire to ruin.

British pre-war interests in North Africa lay primarily in the protection of the Suez Canal. The canal was a strategic link in the sea lanes linking Britain with her empire in the Middle East, India, and the Pacific. The protection of these vital sea lanes extended from Gibraltar to Malta, Cyprus, Palestine, and Egypt. The centerpiece of this defensive system was Egypt. Although Egypt had gained independence in the 1920s, she maintained military ties with Britain. In 1936 an Anglo-Egyptian treaty allowed Britain to station troops in Egypt for the defense of the canal.¹⁷

Growing concerned with Italian ambitions in Ethiopia, Britain sought to limit Italian expansionism through diplomacy. Shortly after Italy conquered Ethiopia, the British sought a non-aggression pact with Italy to reduce the chance of war in Africa and the Mediterranean. These efforts resulted in an Anglo-Italian Agreement in 1938.¹⁸

Increasingly concerned with German aggression in central Europe and Italian expansion into Albania in 1939, the British secured an assistance agreement with Turkey and provided assurances of support to Greece and Romania.¹⁹ Britain's concern with the deteriorating situation in southern Europe resulted in the forming of a Middle East Command in Cairo in 1939. General Archibald Wavell assumed command in July 1939 and set about assessing the threat to his area of operations. Wavell was cognizant of the vital importance of the Suez Canal and the Middle Eastern oil fields.

He noted three principal threats to the British situation in the Middle East and southern Europe.²⁰ The first possibility was that Italy would attack in either Egypt, Sudan, or East Africa and sever British lines of communication in the Mediterranean and Red Sea by sea and air attack. The second threat was that Germany, possibly in cooperation with Russia, would attack through the Balkans to secure the oil fields in Romania. Thirdly, he considered that

Russia alone might advance into Iraq to capture the British-operated oil fields so vital to the Empire.

Wavell's grim assessment became even more ominous by mid-1940. In June of that year, the Germans had decisively defeated the Allies during the Battle of France. France, Belgium, and the Netherlands had surrendered and lay prostrate before German might. The British managed to extricate the bulk of their army from France; however, the formations had been forced to abandon their heavy weapons during the evacuation from Dunkirk.²¹ As previously stated, in early June Italy had also declared war on Britain and France. Britain now faced both imminent invasion from German forces positioned on the English Channel and an Italian foe threatening communications through the Mediterranean Sea and posing an increasing threat to British possessions throughout the Middle East.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain aptly summed up the British strategic situation as:

In these summer days of 1940 after the fall of France we were all alone. None of the British Dominions or India or the Colonies could send decisive aid, or send what they had in time. The victorious, enormous German armies, thoroughly equipped and with large reserves of captured weapons and arsenals behind them, were gathering for the final stroke. Italy, with numerous and imposing forces, had declared war upon us, and eagerly sought our destruction in the Mediterranean and in Egypt. In the Far East, Japan glared inscrutably, and pointedly requested the closing of the Burma Road against supplies for China. Soviet Russia was bound to Nazi Germany by her pact, and lent important aid to Hitler in raw materials. Spain, which had already occupied the International Zone of Tangier, might turn against us at any moment and demand Gibraltar, or invite the Germans to help her attack it, or mount batteries to hamper passage through the Straits. The France of Petain and Bordeaux, soon moved to Vichy, might any day be forced to declare war upon us. What was left at Toulon of the French Fleet seemed to be in German power. Certainly we had no lack of foes.²²

Churchill would prove to be a stubborn and wily wartime leader who galvanized the British people to resist the overwhelming odds against them. Although he possessed formidable qualities, he exhibited several traits that would constantly bedevil his military commanders. Churchill was a visionary strategist who incessantly developed plans that were beyond British military capabilities. Churchill first demonstrated his tendency for strategic overreach during World War I when, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he was the principal architect of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign in Turkey. As Prime Minister, he concocted schemes throughout World War II for operations in Norway, Turkey, and the Balkans that irritated his professional military leaders. These schemes were accompanied by diplomatic commitments to assorted nations that greatly complicated the purely military operations of his commanders.

The second trait that so exasperated his commanders was his seeming incomprehension of the administrative and logistical efforts needed to conduct modern warfare.²³ Churchill's wartime service had been as a cavalry officer during Britain's numerous colonial campaigns in the 1890s. The Prime Minister had the disconcerting habit of badgering his commanders for immediate action with the forces at hand. Churchill had served in an Army that essentially put every man in the theater into action with rifle or saber. He could not grasp that modern, mechanized armies required nearly three support troops to sustain every single soldier involved in direct combat. This combination of intrigue and demand for immediate action caused great problems for his commanders.

By the summer of 1940 the most perilous threat, that of direct German invasion of the British homeland, had passed when the Luftwaffe failed to gain air supremacy during the "Battle of Britain." Though threat of direct invasion had receded, the Italians in North Africa and East Africa were becoming increasingly belligerent.

CORRELATION OF FORCES

In June 1940, Italy's military forces were deployed in the Italian mainland, Libya, Ethiopia, and Somaliland. Italy maintained the preponderance of its naval and air power in the homeland with smaller air and naval forces deployed in its colonial possessions. A substantial portion of Italian land forces were deployed in the colonies; however, these forces were trained and equipped as colonial garrisons and lacked significant offensive capability.

The Italians maintained a force of 250,000 soldiers in Libya. The commander of the Libyan-based forces, Marshal Italo Balbo, had divided his command into two armies.²⁴ The Fifth Army, commanded by General Italo Gariboldi and comprised of seven divisions, was responsible for the defense of Tripolitania. Its primary responsibility was to guard against French incursions from Tunisia and Algeria. With the French surrender in 1940, the threat disappeared and allowed movement of most of this force eastward to reinforce Italian units in Cyrenaica.

Italian forces in Cyrenaica were organized as the Tenth Army, initially comprising five divisions and under the command of General Mario Berti. Berti's forces were comprised mainly of foot mobile infantry who were almost totally lacking in anti-tank capability. His armored forces consisted of light, tracked machine gun carriers and thinly armored, poorly armed tanks.²⁵ The Italian tanks were mechanically unreliable and armed with ineffective 37mm or 47mm main guns. The artillery was the most potent Italian force, and was extensively armed with a 100mm

towed howitzer. This weapon proved effective against British armor but was easily outranged by British field guns.²⁶ Although Italian gunners often stood by their guns until overrun, they could not withstand a combined British artillery-armor assault. Marshal Balbo recognized the deficiencies of his forces and pleaded for better weapons instead of additional soldiers. In June he cabled Mussolini, "It is useless to send more thousands of men if then we cannot supply them with the indispensable requirements to move and fight."²⁷ Balbo's request fell on deaf ears and by December 1940 the Italian Tenth Army had grown in strength to ten divisions but with no appreciable increase in quality of weaponry.

Italian air force assets in North Africa initially consisted of three fighter and four bombing wings. The fighter arm was comprised mostly of obsolete Fiat bi-wing fighters and a lesser number of monoplane fighters. The Italian fighters would prove to be thoroughly outclassed by modern British aircraft. Due to lack of competent fighter escort, the Italian bombers were largely ineffective. Although the Italians outnumbered the British almost three-to-one in the air,²⁸ the combination of woeful equipment and poor command structure made their air effort a total failure. Marshal Balbo would himself fall victim to ineffectual Italian air coordination when Italian anti-aircraft guns mistakenly shot down his plane shortly after the outbreak of war.²⁹

The Italian Navy supported North African operations primarily by escorting supply convoys to Libyan ports. The large fleet remained principally in home waters and rarely sallied forth to challenge the British. On the few occasions they did go to sea, the Italians would quickly break off action and scurry for home ports.

Reluctant to engage the enemy, the Italians massed their principal warships at the port of Taranto on Italy's eastern coast. This refuge turned into a death trap in November 1940 when the British launched a night torpedo bomber raid from carriers steaming off the Italian mainland. In a matter of minutes, three of Italy's six battleships lay crippled at their berths.³⁰ The reluctance of the Italian navy to seek battle, coupled with the devastating effects of the Taranto raid, reduced Italian naval operations to virtual irrelevance during the upcoming battles for Libya.

In addition to forces committed to Libya, Italy maintained a colonial army of nearly 300,000 troops in Ethiopia and Somaliland.³¹ Although these forces played no active role in the upcoming campaign in Libya, they remained a source of concern to the British until they were finally defeated in 1941. Their principal function was to draw off British assets from other fronts and serve as a distraction from more urgent war requirements.

The British Middle East Command, under the leadership of General Wavell, was responsible for the defense of North Africa, East Africa, Arabia, and Palestine. In addition, the

Middle East Command's operational area included the Balkans and Turkey. Army forces in Egypt were under the command of General Maitland Wilson. The offensive power of the British was concentrated into the Western Desert Force, commanded by LTG Richard O'Connor, and comprised of the 7th Armored and 4th Indian Divisions. Although understrength, both divisions were filled with long service regulars who were exceedingly well-trained. The 7th Armored Division had been led by MG Percy Hobart, a premier armor officer, prior to the war and was considered by O'Connor to be one of the most proficient divisions in the British Army.³² O'Connor was able to field 36,000 soldiers in his area of operations by late 1940. Although lacking in manpower, the British forces were mechanized and capable of high intensity offensive maneuver. The main striking power of the Western Desert Force was its heavy and medium tank units. The British heavy tank, the Matilda, was heavily armored and carried a potent 40mm tank gun. Its principal deficiencies were that it was very slow and required extensive maintenance.³³ The British medium tanks, the Cruisers, were lightly armored but quite speedy.³⁴ In addition, they carried the same main tank gun as the Matilda. Both tanks, if provided adequate maintenance, were much more reliable and potent weapons than their Italian counterparts.

The British Royal Air Force initially deployed three fighter and five bomber squadrons in Egypt.³⁵ The fighter squadrons had been equipped with the Gladiator biplane fighter, which were about equal to their Italian foes.³⁶ However, these aircraft were gradually replaced with the Hurricane monoplane fighter, which was greatly superior in performance than any Italian fighter. Britain's successful defense against the Luftwaffe during the autumn of 1940 allowed increasing numbers of Hurricanes to be diverted to Egypt. To support their first offensive in North Africa, the British deployed three squadrons of these excellent fighters to Egypt by December 1940.³⁷

The Royal Navy maintained two large fleets in the Mediterranean, one at Gibraltar and a second at Alexandria.³⁸ Naval forces at Gibraltar were organized as "Force H," under the command of Admiral Sir James Somerville and were responsible for operations in the western Mediterranean. The fleet based at Alexandria, commanded by Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, maintained a forward flotilla at Malta that continuously harried Italian convoys en route to Libya. Cunningham's main force repeatedly turned back the main Italian fleet, severely damaged it at Taranto, and kept it confined to home port except for a few brief, unsuccessful forays. Although successful as a fighting force, the Royal Navy could not guarantee safety from air attack for British merchant ships attempting to traverse the narrow Sicilian Straits. Convoys

from Britain to Egypt were required to make a lengthy voyage around Africa to deliver crucial supplies to O'Connor's Western Desert Force.³⁹

Remaining forces available to the Middle Eastern Command were scattered throughout the area of operations, primarily to garrison the Middle Eastern and African colonies. The greatest concentrations, outside of Egypt, were some 9,000 troops in Sudan and 8500 in Kenya with the mission of defending against an incursion by the Italian Army located in Ethiopia and Somaliland.⁴⁰

Although desperately short in overall manpower, the British Middle Eastern Command possessed a highly efficient system of command and control.⁴¹ British Army and Royal Air Force headquarters were co-located in the same building in Cairo to ensure maximum cooperation of air and ground forces. Although not co-located, Cunningham's Mediterranean fleet headquarters maintained a close relationship with the air/land headquarters staff. In addition, the British services formed a Joint Planning Staff, which considered problems from the point of view of all three services. The efficiency of British command and control procedures would make the best use of the exceedingly slim resources at hand.

THE WESERN DESERT

Cyrenaica and western Egypt would be the scene of the first major battles in North Africa. This area, referred to as the Western Desert, stretches nearly 500 miles from El Alamein, 80 miles west of the Egyptian port city Alexandria, to El Aghalia on the Gulf of Sirte, on the border between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. The area was sparsely populated, with most of the inhabitants concentrated in small villages and ports along the coast. The only permanent roads ran close to the coastline. The interior is a great desert plateau that shelves steeply down to sea level near the coast. This shelf was referred to as "the escarpment." Where the coastline bulges between Derna and Benghazi, the escarpment becomes a range of cultivable hills. Southward, a rocky, barren, and waterless desert stretches for hundreds of miles.⁴²

The terrain of the battle area dictated the tactics available to the opposing forces. The large Italian infantry divisions, lacking in mechanized transport, would advance eastward close to the coast along the permanent road structure. Depending on natural sources of water, they could not operate in the interior south of the escarpment. In addition, their truck transportation, possessing little cross-country ability, did not enable them to move supplies to units operating far from the coastal area. The less numerous, but more mechanized, British divisions were capable of conducting shallow hooks into the desert to catch the Italian flanks. The rocky desert

was passable to mechanized forces at most points, the primary limitations being the ability to navigate in the featureless terrain and capability to transport enough fuel, ammunition, and water to sustain the maneuvering force.

The issue of logistics has always been a determining factor in desert war. In this regard, Cyrenaica offers significant advantages to its occupiers, not in terms of natural resources, but through the use of its small seaports. The cities of Benghazi, Tobruk, and Bardia all possessed ports of limited capacity. In the possession of the Italians, providing they could safely sail transports to the ports, the Italians would not have to rely on truck routes back to the main port of Tripoli. With advance supply bases in Cyrenaica, they hoped to push their Army deep into Egypt. Another critical advantage was that aircraft based in Cyrenaica could easily interdict British transports en route to resupply beleaguered Malta. Conversely, in British hands, these same ports would enable the Western Desert Force to press on into Tripolitania and permanently clear North Africa of Italian forces. British air bases established near Benghazi would also provide air cover for resupply convoys en route to Malta.

SIDI BARRANI TO BEDA FOMM

The Italians launched their long-awaited offensive into Egypt on 13 September 1940 (see Figure 2). Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, who had replaced Marshal Balbo, had delayed the offensive despite repeated directives from Mussolini for three months, as he unsuccessfully attempted to secure more transport and better armored vehicles for his army. "Never," wrote Count Galeazzo Ciano, "has a military operation been undertaken so much against the will of a commander."⁴³

The Italian Tenth Army advanced with five divisions, supported by a mobile armored group, and 300 bombers and fighters.⁴⁴ The British planned to delay and fall back on prepared positions far to the east at Mersa Matruh. On 16 September the Italians reached Sidi Barrani, 65 miles from their starting point, halted, and began to build fortifications. To the surprise of the British, the Italian offensive had shot its bolt. In this brief foray, the Italians lost some 3,500 soldiers vice 160 British casualties.⁴⁵ The Italians immediately began building a series of fortified camps extending from the coast to a distance of 40 miles to the southwest. Each camp contained an infantry brigade with supporting armor and artillery. The fundamental weakness of the system was that the camps were too far apart to be mutually supporting.⁴⁶

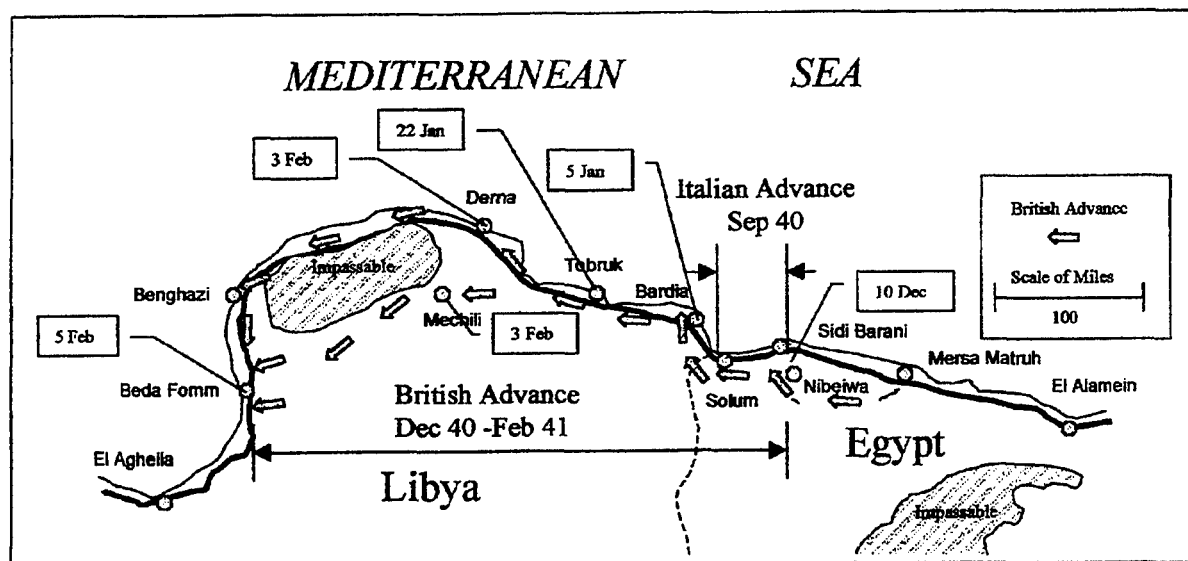


Figure 2: Italian Advance and British Offensive

The British recognized that a further advance by the Italians was no longer imminent and utilized the period September through December 1940 to prepare for offensive action. They conducted extensive reconnaissance and rehearsals for attack upon the Italian fortifications, and continued to build up their armor and mechanized formations. The British initiated an air campaign to gain superiority over the battlefield and pushed forward their logistical infrastructure. On 7 December, O'Connor sallied forth on a planned five-day raid against the Italians around Sidi Barrani. Attacking with the 7th Armored and 4th Indian divisions, O'Connor planned to strike the southernmost Italian camps and consecutively roll them up one by one. By 11 December, the Italians were in total disarray and falling back to the Libyan border. The results of this first battle far exceeded British expectations, ending in the capture of 38,300 Italians, 237 guns, 73 tanks, and large quantities of supplies and transport.⁴⁷

In the air, the Royal Air Force had won almost complete superiority, losing ten aircraft while their Hurricane fighters routed the Italian Air Force.⁴⁸ O'Connor was exuberant over the rapid annihilation of three Italian divisions, but later on 11 January was sorely disappointed to learn that the 4th Indian Division was being withdrawn from his command for operations in the Sudan.⁴⁹ General Wavell, who had planned for O'Connor to only make a brief raid, had set in motion a buildup of forces in Sudan to counter the threat from Italian-controlled Ethiopia.

O'Connor pushed on to the port of Bardia in Cyrenica with 7th Armored by 2 January 1941. He halted to bring forward supplies and a new infantry division, the 6th Australian Division, prior to assaulting Bardia.⁵⁰ Bardia was heavily fortified and required an extensive bombardment to

soften the defenses. Accompanied by 22 Matildas, Australian infantry assaulted the fortifications on 3 January, penetrated the perimeter on 4 January, and accepted the Italian garrison's surrender on 5 January. Over 38,000 Italians surrendered along with 33 coast defense guns, over 300 other field guns, 120 tanks, and 700 trucks. British casualties numbered some 500, mostly suffered by the Australian infantry.⁵¹

The British 7th Armored Division pushed westward and enveloped the seaport of Tobruk by 9 December. The British were beginning to feel the effects of outrunning their logistics tail by early January.⁵² Accumulation of supplies and vehicle maintenance caused the postponement of further offensive operations until 21 January. Tobruk, a far better port than Bardia, was protected by two lines of fortifications, but its perimeter was too extensive for its garrison to defend. Replicating the tactics used at Bardia, the Australians captured the port on 22 January. Some 25,000 Italians surrendered at Tobruk along with 200 guns, 87 tanks, and large quantities of transport. The British suffered 400 casualties, the bulk again among the Australian infantry.⁵³

General O'Connor requested permission to extend his offensive with the objectives of capturing the port of Benghazi and destroying the remaining Italian units located in eastern Libya. Wavell, who was receiving repeated cables from Churchill concerning potential British operations in Greece, nevertheless agreed to an extension of O'Connor's offensive. O'Connor launched his final offensive on 23 January 1941.

The British pressed slowly westward along the coastal road against steadily resisting Italian units until 31 January. On that date, a sudden slackening of resistance was noted and aerial reconnaissance detected large columns of Italians withdrawing westward. Recognizing that the Italians were initiating a general retreat from Cyrenaica, O'Connor directed the 6th Australian Division to push down the coastal route towards Benghazi while shifting the 7th Armored Division for a thrust through the interior to intercept the Italians south of Benghazi. O'Connor accepted great risk to undertake this final effort as the 7th Armored Division tanks were in doubtful mechanical condition and his fuel supplies almost inadequate for the proposed 150-mile sprint to the coast.⁵⁴

The 7th Armored Division road marched across the interior of Cyrenaica on 4-5 February and cut the coastal road south of Benghazi ahead of the retreating Italians. The road march was described as a "nightmare" by its participants and many armored vehicles broke down along the route.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the weakened 7th Armored resisted two days of assault by the desperate Italians until, on 7 February, the remaining units of the Tenth Italian Army began to surrender. Caught between the advancing 6th Australian Division approaching from their rear and the 7th Armored Division blocking their escape route, another 24,000 Italians surrendered.

In a period of two months, a two-division corps had advanced 500 miles through the desert and destroyed an Army of ten divisions. The British had captured 130,000 prisoners, 400 tanks, 850 guns, and thousands of vehicles at a cost of 2,000 casualties.⁵⁶ Although the British divisions were in dire need of resupply and maintenance, the road to Tripoli and complete subjugation of Libya lay open. Opposing this British force was a demoralized Italian army comprised of four understrength and decidedly inferior infantry divisions that were fleeing in complete rout.

O'Connor began preparations for the movement to Tripoli when, on 12 February, he suddenly learned that his advance must halt. The preponderance of his force was to be removed from his command and reallocated for operations in Greece. O'Connor would later state that he should have advanced without permission into Tripoli, and he admitted his eternal regret for not taking that course.⁵⁷ While O'Connor had achieved a classic operational victory in North Africa, decisions made at the highest levels of British political and military leadership would discard his great victory and all its resulting opportunities to pursue a forlorn hope of opening a new front against Germany in the Balkans.

STRATEGIC MISJUDGMENT

The seeds of the British decision to intervene in Greece came from Churchill's intense desire to confront the main German threat in Europe. British pre-war strategy in 1939 included plans to encircle Germany via a protective military alliance with Poland and amassing the combined Anglo-French naval and military strength to threaten Germany's sea lanes and western flank. In May of 1940, an assessment of Allied and German strengths was prepared by General Wavell, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, which indicated the factors that guaranteed an ultimate Allied victory. His assessment boils down to three primary thoughts.⁵⁸ First, that oil, shipping, sea power, and air power were the keys to ultimate victory. Secondly, that the Allies possessed most of the world's oil supply, most of the shipping, the greatest naval strength, and the potential to develop the greatest airpower. Thirdly, that Germany had access to very limited sources of oil production, possessed very limited shipping capability and a miniscule navy, and whose great air power would be a diminishing asset as Allied airpower steadily attrited it away. The German operational successes in 1939 and 1940 demolished the pre-war British strategy by eliminating all of the Allies except the British Empire. However, Wavell's assessment of British vice German strengths still remained true, though of course the balance of actual land and air power had been redressed in favor of Germany.

Prime Minister Churchill recognized that victory over Germany could be achieved only by preserving the British strengths identified by Wavell and by forming new alliances. To preserve Britain's chokehold on mid-east oil supplies, his government directed British military leaders to check Italian advances into Egypt and Sudan. On the diplomatic front, the British began desperate attempts to recruit new allies—and the most desirable ally was the United States. Unfortunately, the Americans were not predisposed to actively enter the war on Britain's side in 1940, though she was willing to provide moral and material support. The next most desirable ally was Russia; however, Russia had signed a non-aggression pact with Germany and was actually providing assistance to Germany. With no prospects of the United States or Russia joining her, Britain had turned to Greece and Turkey as potential allies. If these countries should join Britain against Germany, two important advantages would be rendered to Britain. Firstly, the vital mid-east area would be shielded from a northern thrust by German forces and secondly the British could combine forces with Greece and Turkey to threaten Germany's oil supplies from Romania. The Turkish and Greek governments recognized the peril of such an arrangement and did not actively seek to enter a general war on the side of Britain. Nevertheless, Great Britain had offered assurances of support to both countries should Germany threaten either of them with attack.

On 28 October, Mussolini ordered the invasion of Greece. Mussolini's reasons for seeking war against Greece were no more than a desire to emulate Hitler's triumphs, to settle old scores with the Greeks, reassert Italian interests in the Balkans, and secure bases to attack British positions in the eastern Mediterranean.⁵⁹ To Mussolini's surprise, the Greek army defeated his offensive in mid-November and were steadily pushing into Albania by month's end. In November, Britain began providing limited support to Greece as had been guaranteed; however, the Greeks were careful not to grant Britain anything more than short-range tactical facilities for fear of antagonizing the Germans. Although the invasion of Greece did not initially interrupt Wavell's plans to attack Libya in December 1940, he was aware that British commitments in Greece would likely increase in the near future. Churchill's position on Greece became clear on 2 November when he cabled, "Greek situation must be held to dominate all others now. We are well aware of our slender resources. Aid to Greece must be attentively studied lest the Turkish position is lost through proof that England never tries to keep her guarantees."⁶⁰

On 10 January 1941 General Wavell learned of a new and more ominous threat when the British Chiefs of Staff warned him that German forces were moving into Bulgaria to possibly support their Italian allies against Greece. If a German move against Greece occurred, the

Chiefs of Staff informed Wavell that the offensive into Libya must be halted and British troops from Egypt would be rushed to support the Greeks.⁶¹ In mid-January, Greek Premier John Metaxas rejected additional British support, fearing that it would only antagonize the Germans.⁶² The Greeks were enjoying considerable success against the Italians and were unconvinced that Germany would intervene on behalf of Italy.

By February 1941, the Greek situation had tragically transformed for the worse. Although still steadily driving the Italians back into Albania, the Greeks were becoming increasingly anxious about the mounting strength of German forces moving into Bulgaria. The Greeks were further shocked by the unexpected death of Premier Metaxas in early February. Alexander Koryzis, the new Greek premier, immediately appealed to Churchill on 8 February to provide the promised support against a possible German onslaught. On 11 February, General Wavell received a cable from the Chiefs of Staff in London informing him that Churchill had decided to honor the Greek request for support.⁶³ Wavell immediately halted O'Connor's advance and began diverting forces from O'Connor's army in Libya and from the forces available in Egypt and Sudan to form four divisions to be sent to Greece.

Churchill dispatched Anthony Eden, Foreign Secretary, and General Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to Cairo to join General Wavell. At the time of Eden and Dill's departure, Churchill was adamant that Britain would honor its pledge of support to Greece. The mission of these two senior British officials was to accompany Wavell to Athens to coordinate British plans with their Greek ally.

Shortly after the departure of Eden and Dill, Churchill developed strong second thoughts about committing British forces to Greece. Hesitation now replaced his earlier fierce determination and Churchill began to subtly shift responsibility for a final decision on the matter to his subordinates now gathered in Cairo. On 20 February, Churchill sent the following cable to Cairo. "Do not consider yourselves obligated to a Greek enterprise if in your hearts you feel it will be only another Norwegian fiasco. But of course you know how valuable success would be."⁶⁴

Upon receipt of the cable, British leaders in Cairo conferred and decided to go forward with plans to dispatch British troops to Greece.⁶⁵ The decision was made partly due to their feelings that Great Britain's prestige was at risk should they not honor her commitments to Greece. More practical reasons for the British leaders' decisions were that British troop movements were already underway, that Generals Wavell and Dill considered the opportunity worth the risk, and that the Greeks had finally agreed to contract their northern lines and concentrate defenses in the most advantageous positions to counter a German offensive from

Bulgaria. On 25 February, the British learned that the Greeks had reversed course and would not shorten their defensive line as previously agreed. At this point, a withdrawal of support from the Greeks had become politically impossible for Churchill. Recognizing the terrible danger now developing in Greece, Churchill cabled Eden, "If they (Greeks) resolve to fight to the death, obviously we must, as already said, share their ordeal."⁶⁶

Once the commitment had been made to Greece, General Wavell determined that his courses of action were limited to diverting four divisions from his command to Greece, to assume the defensive in Libya with the remnants of O'Connor's army, and to push forward his own weakened offensive against Italian East Africa with the remaining forces previously concentrated in Sudan. The results of this course of action were threefold. First, British forces did in fact defeat the Italians in East Africa. Second, powerful German forces intervened in Greece, quickly conquering the country and ejecting the British after inflicting 25,000 casualties and capturing or destroying four division's worth of precious heavy equipment (see Figure 3). Third, the Germans dispatched General Rommel's Africa Corps to Libya in late February which then drove the weakened British army back into Egypt by April of 1941.

CONCLUSION

Students of military history and professional military officers can draw two striking conclusions from Great Britain's 1940-41 operations in North Africa and the Mediterranean. The first is that a technologically advanced and logistically supported military force, even though inferior in numbers, is capable of decisively defeating a much larger but unsophisticated foe. Second, tremendous operational victories may create opportunities for much greater strategic success, but senior political and military leaders must recognize those opportunities and not be tempted to deviate toward other goals.

The annihilation of the Italian Tenth Army in North Africa was a classic operational victory. At the end of the campaign, Britain was on the verge of securing a tremendous strategic triumph in Africa. After his arrival in Africa, Rommel stated that, "If Wavell had now continued his advance into Tripolitania, no resistance worthy of the name could have been mounted against him – so well had his superbly planned offensive succeeded."⁶⁷

The opportunity presented to the British would be squandered because of Churchill's and Wavell's strategic misjudgment and keen desire to reenter the fight against Germany in the Balkans. Regarding his decision to intervene in Greece, Churchill wrote, "I didn't do it simply to save the Greeks. Of course honour and all that came in. But I wanted to form a Balkan front. I

wanted Yugoslavia, and I hoped for Turkey. That, with Greece, would have given us fifty divisions. A nut for the Germans to crack."⁶⁸

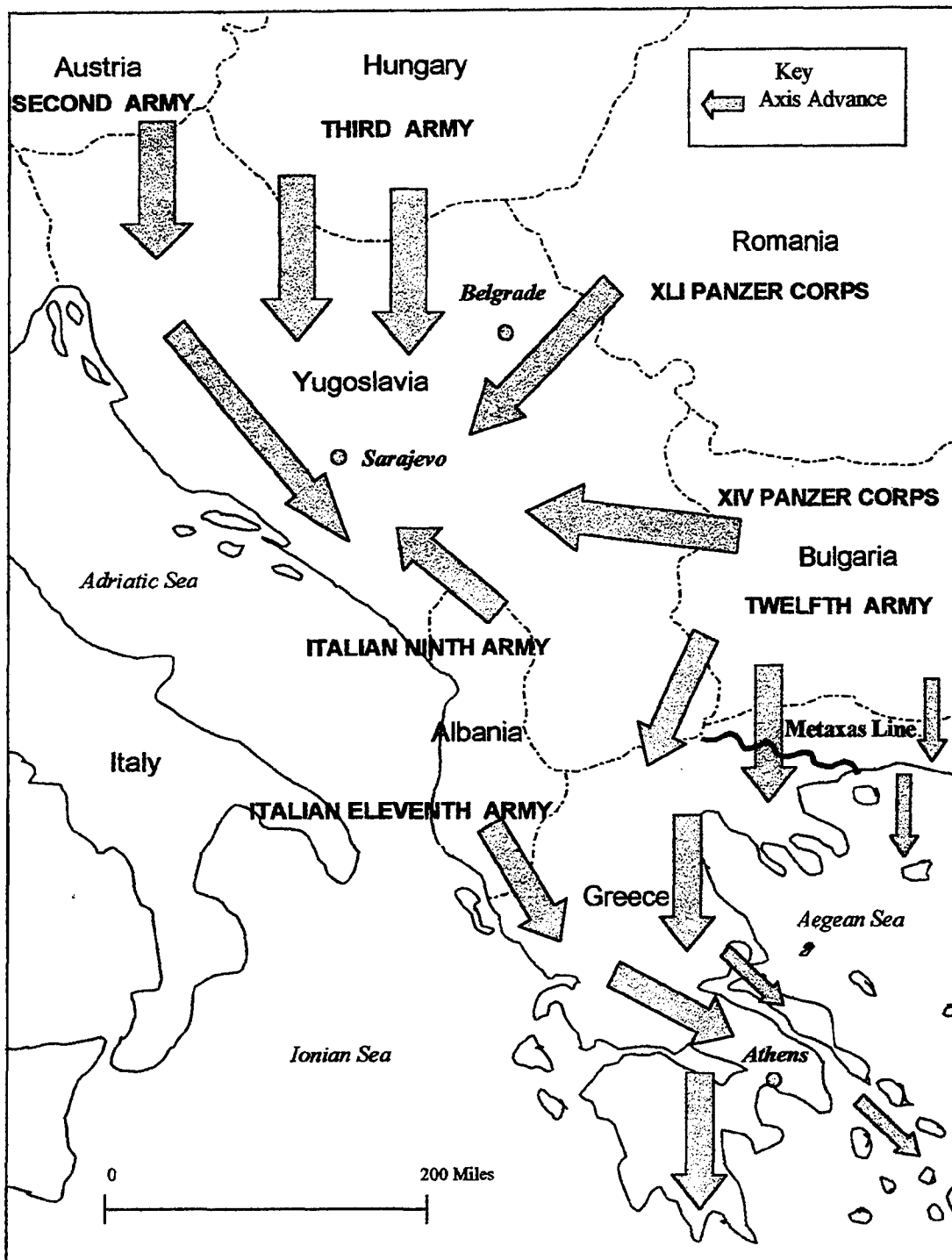


Figure 3: Axis Invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece

The British blunder in the Mediterranean theater in 1941 can be directly traced to the imbalances of the ends, ways, and means of their strategy. The ends of the strategy were to inflict defeat on Germany. The ways selected were to secure allies in the Balkans who, in conjunction with supporting British forces, would defeat the German offensive and then threaten the Romanian (and only) source of German oil production. The means to accomplish the desired action were the combined Greek and British military forces available in the Mediterranean theater. At the eleventh hour, Churchill recognized that the available means were insufficient to defeat the Germans. Due to political reasons, the British had boxed themselves into a losing strategy where their national honor required the forfeiture of the advantages gained in North Africa and the destruction of four British divisions.

Senior military leaders should remember the lessons taught from the disastrous British experiences of 1941. It is incumbent upon strategic leaders to carefully appraise the ends, ways, and means available prior to committing their nation to a particular strategy. Options rapidly dwindle once a flawed strategy is embarked upon and no degree of personal bravery or operational brilliance can be relied upon to salvage such a situation.

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